



CLOSE READING IN A NUTSHELL

Gather with others in front of something you want to study.

An intervention, an object, a building, a piece of signage...

Designate a facilitator to hold you to the protocol.

The facilitator keeps the group faithful to observation rather than interpretation by continually asking, *Do you see that directly, or can you tell us what you're seeing that has you draw that conclusion?* Or plainly, *How do you know that?*

Begin to describe what you see, starting with one and two word descriptions.

Bigger thoughts will arrive –put them on the shelf for now.

Questions will arise, put those on the shelf also. A good test in this first stage is to ask if your thought seems like something too obvious to say. If so, say it. *It's a sphere. It's in two parts. It is made of one material.*

Once these very plain descriptions are exhausted, begin to connect them to one another and see if you can describe what effect these connections have.

The way this part of the sign is attached to the wall with the bent nail makes me think this was done quickly. Or, The way the paint is scuffed on this side of the chair makes me think it was dragged or something scraped against it.

When these connections feel unanchored, ask one another to go back to observations to re-ground the interpretation

Can you show me what you're seeing that makes you think the paint was scuffed and not just left unpainted?

Continue until you feel you've thoroughly seen this thing before you.



Close reading is the practice of continually asking ourselves and one another: *What is it you're seeing, that I can also see, that has you draw that conclusion? Or has you make that interpretation?*

In the examples that follow, someone observing that something is made of wood is met with the question *What are you seeing that makes you think this is wood?* Well I see grain. *If I didn't know what grain was, what would you point to so that I could also see grain?* The lines and circles.

OVERVIEW

Having moved your intervention through a design process, you arrive in the **iteration phase** at a point of wanting to ask what comes next. You want to see what you've done. And you need to make sure that you're looking at **what did happen** and not just what we thought was going to happen. One way of doing this is through close reading your intervention.

Close reading can be approached a number of different ways and grows out of a set of four nested ideas.

1. The first of these is an understanding that really seeing something requires finding ways to verify that you're talking about what's in fact there -- not what we *assume* is there.
2. The second is that a group of people looking at something together can see more dimensions of that thing than one person looking alone.
3. The third is that deliberate use of specific, descriptive language can support the goal of helping one another to see more.
4. And the fourth is a recognition that habit is a strong enough force that you need a shared protocol to keep from skipping over your stated intention to engage in new kinds of seeing. If we know that the temptation will be to skip over plain description of what you see, jumping right into interpretation (or judgements, likes or dislikes, opinions) then you need something or someone to hold the container.